

An LBJ Apologia That Fails

NO HAIL, NO FAREWELL

Louis Heren

(Harper & Row, 275 pp., \$6.95)

Reviewed by Philip Geyelin

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Louis Heren is the Washington correspondent for *The Times* of London so it follows that he is a professional, articulate, probably better educated and more worldly than his American colleagues, and well aware of that; it also follows that he is much given, even more so than most of his British colleagues, to seeking effects in the odd or unconventional thought to running where the rest of the pack is not running. This doesn't necessarily make him right, or even always rational. But it makes him readable and thereby rescues what is otherwise a pointless exercise.

In a jacket blurb, John Fisher would have us accept Mr. Heren in the company of Tocqueville, Maurois, and D. W. Brogan, where he might conceivably belong, for all I know. But he does not belong there on the basis of *No Hail, No Farewell* which begins as one long apologia for Lyndon Johnson but hardly winds up that way, because much as Mr. Heren seems to delight in building up Mr. Johnson at the expense of John F. Kennedy, in seeing through the charms of the latter while perceiving the strengths of the former, he cannot bring it off.

What moves him more

than this theme, if that's the word for it, is his profound contempt for the American performance in Vietnam. "Foreign countries without an established colonial service cannot hope to administer another," he says at one point in a particularly effective critique of our Vietnam effort, adding: "That was the fundamental difference between the British performance in Malaya and the American effort in Vietnam." Heren is good at this business of standing back as an outsider, and seeing where we went wrong. But there is no way to do this in the case of Vietnam, of course, without bumping into that other theme: try as he does to make it Kennedy's war, there is no way to recapitulate the period from 1963 to 1968, without in the end, making it Johnson's war.

Nonetheless, Heren tries. He implies, even, that Kennedy sent the first military advisers to Vietnam; actually he inherited a small detachment from his predecessor and built upon it, but Heren argues that it was Kennedy's action that "gravely compromised" President Johnson. (Heren would even have us believe that the Cuban missile crisis was really Kennedy's fault and never mind those Soviet missiles that Nikita Khrushchev had implanted.) But even Heren concedes "there was no commitment in Vietnam until Johnson chose to make one." And from there on it gets worse: "The Johnson Administration refused to be honest with the American people . . . Truth was, of course, the first casualty of the Vietnam conflict . . . In trying to insulate the electo-

rate from the war. [Johnson] committed a grave political blunder. It might almost be characterized as a crime."

This has to do with the third costliest war in American history, mind you, and Heren tells us that, we were systematically lied to about the most fundamental aspects of the war, in very nearly a criminal way, and then says that when the public had "hounded Johnson out of office" we should try to understand this rough son of Texas, who was so cruelly sneered at by Eastern sophisticates, because he was "to a large extent a victim of circumstance beyond his control."

It doesn't hang together. Of course there was sneering at Johnson and deep grief for Kennedy and of course Kennedy was martyred and magnified by the nature of his death. But this did not cripple Lyndon Johnson; there was, in fact, a considerable sympathy for the man and a strong sense of moral obligation, if not political imperative, to help him in the dark weeks and months after the assassination. Heren barely mentions this, concentrating on the few Kennedy men who quit as much as on the many

who stayed. Yet Heren tells us that Johnson's legislative accomplishments in 1964 and 1965 will be his monument. He does not explain how Johnson could build such a monument in the face of all that ugly anti-Texan bias.

Earlier in the book, Heren writes that "Johnson was not the gun-toting oaf he was said to be." So there you have it. Apparently some significant number of people thought Johnson was a gun-toting oaf and he wasn't. That is about as much of a theme, or even central point, as you can find in this book, which is disappointing because Heren must have more in his notebooks, must have the kind of sources from the old Johnson crowd who could have helped him contribute something new to the record of the period. But this is not history and it is not really a sketch of Johnson, and it is not Tocqueville or Brogan giving serious and sustained thought to American society and system, although there are some nice flashes of the latter. Rather, it is a combination of all three, which is one of its weaknesses. The other is that it is defensive about Lyndon Johnson in precisely the wrong way. It blames everything on the "terrible mess" that he inherited from Kennedy, describing it as one of the worst ever left to a new President, without the slightest mention of the mess that Johnson left President Nixon or the one that Kennedy inherited. It apologizes for Lyndon Johnson because of his origin which, in a way, was the same mistake that Johnson made. He never seemed to know his own true strengths. It is, in short, exactly the kind of defense that Lyndon Johnson does not need.